

**SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS:  
NO MORE DROPOUTS**

**P-16 Council  
Agenda Item E-3  
December 11, 2001**

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**Discussion**

At its September meeting, P-16 Council members asked the staff to address dropout issues. They are working with other agencies, schools, and postsecondary institutions to provide alternative routes for high school completion so students at risk of leaving high school can still prepare for postsecondary education. (See attachment E-3).

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## **SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION: NO MORE DROPOUTS**

What are the policy barriers that must be removed across educational sectors for Kentucky to adopt a “zero tolerance for dropouts” policy? What changes are required of high schools, postsecondary institutions, and adult education providers to remove these barriers?

### **Background**

Kentucky needs to increase its undergraduate enrollments by 80,000 by 2020. Current dropout levels in high school and college may keep the state from reaching that goal. The current annual high school dropout rate is 5.02 percent, which translates to 9,354 students leaving school each year without a diploma. These dropouts may eventually reenter the system through adult education to obtain a General Educational Development (GED) diploma, they may return to an alternative education program, or they may never return to school. Those with lower levels of education are more likely than the general population to find themselves in poor health, in a low paying job, or in jail.

The staffs of the Kentucky Department of Education, the Council on Postsecondary Education, the Workforce Development Cabinet, and the Kentucky Community and Technical College System met jointly to discuss the following issues:

- How can these systems work together to ensure that students are provided whatever learning opportunities they need—whether in schools, on college campuses, through the Kentucky Virtual High School, or by adult education providers—so that they will receive the high school and postsecondary education they need to become economically self-sufficient?
- How can each education provider be held accountable for results, yet still work cooperatively with other providers for the benefit of students?

Kentucky’s goal is to eliminate potential dropouts and to bring current dropouts back into the education system. The staffs of the collaborating agencies are identifying policy barriers so that they can recommend changes in regulations. They also are identifying alternative ways to allocate resources at both state and local levels to prepare more students for life and work. Chief among these alternatives are access to adult education providers and dual credit and other enrollment opportunities for high school students in postsecondary institutions. Both require effective use of individual graduation plans for middle and high school students.

### **Major Issues**

#### **Identifying existing and potential dropouts**

Collecting data on students who have dropped out will help identify students at risk for leaving school. This can be done through current provisions in KRS Chapter 159 that require school districts to conduct an exit interview and have follow-up contact with dropouts. Records from

this program allow identification of past dropouts and development of activities to return these students to school. Knowledge gained from these interviews allows for interventions when new students present themselves as dropouts during required parent and child counseling sessions. The counseling sessions can assess the student competency levels and identify appropriate options for keeping students in school. Information that exit interviews provide must be used more effectively to identify at-risk students and prevent them from becoming dropouts.

Early identification of potential dropouts is key to keeping students in school. This is the responsibility of the KDE and the local school districts. One of the primary tools for early identification is the Individual Graduation Plan, a process available to local school districts for students as early as the eighth grade. Ideally, intensive planning and assessment of high school coursework based on student aptitude and interest begins at the eighth-grade level. The plan should be revised annually as students continue to refine their interests and career paths. Use of the IGP varies by district. More consistent use of the IGP will reduce dropouts.

### **Pre- and post-learning assessments and service options**

Assessments of student competencies are needed to bring dropouts back into a learning environment and to prescribe appropriate alternative learning options to students who are considering dropping out of school. To develop a coherent plan for offering alternative educational options to both categories of student, educators must agree on criteria for assessing student learning. Aligning student needs and service options will require collaboration among agencies.

As alternatives to traditional high school graduation, the staffs are considering GED completion, a skills/employability certificate, varieties of virtual learning, and dual credit coursework options that lead to the simultaneous awarding of college and high school credit. These options are being used in various local school districts. These local programs need study to determine which are promising for statewide adoption.

Student learning also must be assessed when students leave any of these options. For each program option, the curriculum must be rigorous and challenging and prepare all students for life and work.

### **The General Education Diploma (GED)**

The GED tests have been used since 1947 to demonstrate high school equivalency. The tests cover the basic subject areas of language arts, reading, writing, science, social studies, and mathematics. GED tests are standardized and normed using a national sample of graduating high school seniors. In order to pass the tests, a student must demonstrate a level of skill that meets or surpasses that demonstrated by approximately 67 percent of high school seniors. The tests have traditionally been used for adults, but for the last 10 years states have begun to use the GED tests for students 16 years of age or older who are likely to become dropouts.

Eligibility requirements present the chief barrier to use of the GED as an alternative for students who are having difficulty completing a traditional high school program. In Kentucky, a person must be 19 years of age to take the test unless they meet certain conditions. A 17 year-old may take the test if the last class with which he was enrolled has graduated or he has been out of formal instruction for a year. Students who drop out of school at the compulsory student attendance age of 16 normally must wait a year before being permitted to take the GED test unless they have been placed in a state correctional facility or completed a Job Corps program. If applicants think exigent circumstances exist, they may request an exemption from the local school superintendent. The practical result of these restrictions is that a high school age student must drop out of school to take the test.

The waiting period of one to two years results in students quitting school but being unable to gain employment or to pursue other educational opportunities requiring a high school diploma or a GED. These dropouts do not flourish in a traditional school setting, and some prefer to focus on vocational opportunities. The traditional curriculum may not meet their needs. The problem is compounded by the inconsistency with which school districts offer exemptions for students to take the GED. Some superintendents will not sign exemptions, while others do. In the meantime, these students are out of school and are being counted as dropouts.

The National Center for Education Statistics has indicated that in order to not be counted as a dropout under the NCES definition, the only alternative is for the student to be enrolled in a GED preparation program offered by the K-12 system. Kentucky's existing regulations are being amended to accommodate the statutory changes required for the 2002 GED tests and to reorganize and clarify the regulations. To accommodate student needs, the eligibility regulation would need further revisions. Kentucky could consider additional changes that would:

- Count students completing the GED either in high school or a specified time after leaving high school as a graduate and not as a dropout.
- Require the GED Official Practice Test as an exit test for students seeking withdrawal from high school before graduation. Students passing the practice test should be allowed to take the GED tests immediately and have a credential that would allow employment or future educational opportunities.
- Allow districts to set up alternative GED programs within guidelines set by KDE and approved by the American Council on Education GED Option Program for Selected Secondary Students. These programs would keep the student enrolled and allow the district to receive funding for the student. Entrance criteria should address the following issues:
  - Ensure that the GED option does not become an attractive alternative for students who can finish a regular diploma.
  - Set entrance criteria that preclude the program from becoming a default assignment for students with disabilities.

- Eliminate the funding penalties that districts face when granting students the GED option.
- Create an exemption policy allowing GED completion that is uniformly administered across districts.
- Allow students who have reached the compulsory attendance age and who have been out of school for a specified time, but less than a year, to take the test. This would eliminate the waiting period.

Many students who drop out of high school later realize the need for education. The lack of a high school diploma creates a barrier to further education. After several years have passed, they are reluctant to re-enroll in a traditional high school to obtain a regular diploma and may have work or family responsibilities that hamper their ability to study for the GED. The more students that graduate from high school either by traditional or alternative means, the larger the pool of citizens who can avail themselves of postsecondary educational opportunities when they are ready.

### **Dual credit and dual enrollment options**

While dual credit and dual enrollment options are offered by many postsecondary institutions in Kentucky, the Kentucky Community and Technical College System has taken the lead in working closely with school districts in its service areas to allow students to pursue postsecondary education through participation in dual credit or dual enrollment programs. Students receive college or technical school credit for courses that may be taught at a local high school by KCTCS or high school staff. Students can use their high school senior year more effectively by pursuing more rigorous coursework.

Use of this option, however, is not regulated at the state level. Cooperative arrangements exist between service providers at the local level. Several barriers to dual enrollment or dual credit offering must be removed to make this option more available.

The major barrier to the use of dual credit or dual enrollment programs is the lack of a common calendar. Generally, high schools are not on the same calendar as community and technical colleges. College courses are not necessarily in session when high schools have students in attendance. Conflicts exist between the college and high school employment dates for teachers.

Another problem is certification and accreditation requirements. In many instances, while community and technical college instructors are qualified, they do not possess teacher certification from the Education Professional Standards Board, which is necessary for them to teach high school students. If high school teachers offer these courses, they may not possess the advanced degrees that the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools requires for faculty in accredited institutions.

Third, no consistent funding source is available. In some instances high schools pay the college tuition. In others, colleges waive the tuition for all high school participants, while some colleges allow high school students to attend free of charge on a space-available basis. In addition, school and district accountability measures serve as a disincentive for districts to allow widespread participation in dual enrollment programs. High schools lose average daily attendance funding for the "seat time" lost by students enrolled in programs outside the district.

Fourth, accumulation of KEES scholarship funding may be limited if a student enrolls in a college program while in high school, and student financial aid is unavailable to students who have not yet completed high school.

If the use of the dual credit option is to become widespread, a consistent method must be determined at the state level to finance these arrangements. The state must develop a means for districts to demonstrate accountability without treating students enrolled in college courses as the fiscal equivalent of dropouts.

### **District Funding Accountability Issues**

One of the major barriers to the implementation of alternative learning options is the restrictive nature of the Support Educational Excellence for Kentucky funding formula. The SEEK formula awards funding to local school districts according to average daily attendance of students. In order to receive average daily attendance funding, a student must be in attendance at a local public school and enrolled in coursework that will lead either to the awarding of a diploma or, for certain students with disabilities, to the awarding of a certificate of completion. Because GED programs do not lead to a high school diploma, average daily attendance funding cannot be generated for students who are enrolled in GED preparation programs. This creates a disincentive for schools to operate GED preparation programs, even in settings where they would provide a viable option to keep at-risk students in school.

Average daily attendance funding also creates a disincentive for dual credit or dual enrollment options. If schools release students to take coursework at local community colleges, they are unable to count the students in attendance because a certified teacher is not teaching them. While local schools and community college representatives can and do work together to overcome these obstacles, the current requirements are a barrier.

Average daily attendance funding policies also limit use of resources such as the Kentucky Virtual High School. SEEK funding provides general support for programs provided at local schools. No additional funding is provided to pay the cost of courses taken through the KVHS. District superintendents feel that if average daily attendance funding is used to pay for KVHS tuition, it takes money from local programs.

## **Conclusion**

A number of barriers exist to implementing a “zero tolerance for dropouts” policy. This paper outlines some of the major problems and suggests some actions to remove these barriers.

Recommendations for immediate actions include:

- Eliminate the waiting period for taking the GED.
- Require the GED practice test of all dropouts.
- Implement the GED option for Selected Secondary Students.
- Count students taking dual credit courses in district average daily attendance funding allocations.

Other changes, such as aligning college and high school calendars and developing assessments for various routes to a high school credential, will require additional work before making specific recommendations.